

Benton Harbor doesn't want to be the next Flint. It's already worse

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Benton Harbor — Public officials and residents are grappling with three straight years of lead in their water that exceed state limits and the amounts of lead found in Flint before it became engulfed in its crisis in 2015.

The southwest Michigan city has surpassed the so-called action level of 15 parts per billion since 2018 — the level that is considered dangerous enough to public health that corrective actions need to be taken. This is longer than when Parchment, near Kalamazoo, had two straight years of excessive levels before its lead pipes were replaced last year.

The lead levels in this predominantly Black city of 9,700 people off Lake Michigan and home to Whirlpool Corp. have concerned the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, which is working with city officials on corrective actions. Benton Harbor officials blame the city's water problems on a nearly century-old water system with lead pipes and the slow arrival of federal funding to replace them.

By comparison, the water of neighboring St. Joseph, with a mostly White population whose residents average three times more in personal income than their neighboring residents, has not exceeded lead action levels.

One Benton Harbor civil rights and water activist argues the lead situation would not have been allowed to happen in St. Joseph because it has more money for infrastructure than an impoverished city like Benton Harbor. St. Joseph and Benton Harbor both draw their water from nearby Lake Michigan.

Lovelle Valentine, 43, and his fiancée, Kizzy Cornelius, 42, are so concerned that they will only drink bottled water. Fears about the long-term effects of contaminated water abound.

"It's not only us. What about the little ones growing up? You want them drinking the same water that we grew up on?" Valentine said. "Absolutely not. They don't care about us. We might be the next epidemic like Flint.

"... It affects people coming to visit. They've got to worry about using water here. There's been no explanation or where the problem started or what you're going to do to fix it."

While lead detected in the water system is due mostly to lead pipes that go back decades, Mayor Marcus Muhammad said comparing the lead issue in Benton Harbor to Flint's situation is a "colossal mischaracterization and exaggeration."



KIZZY CORNEILIUS, 42, LEFT, LISTENS TO LOVELL VALENTINE, 43, IN BENTON HARBOR. CHRIS DUMOND, SPECIAL TO THE DETROIT NEWS

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Lovelle Valentine, 43, Benton Harbor resident

It's not only us. What about the little ones growing up? You want them drinking the same water that we grew up on? Absolutely not. They don't care about us. We might be the next epidemic like Flint.

"The issue of homeowners having old lead pipes is an issue that is nationwide. It's not just Benton Harbor," the mayor said. "And I feel personally and politically that Benton Harbor has been targeted by EGLE, by the media, to make it appear as if we have an issue like Flint, which is totally not the case."

The city also argues it's testing twice as many homes after action levels were exceeded and is doing so every six months instead of the former practice of every three years. The Berrien County Health Department has been distributing water filters to residents with state funding since 2019.

The reason that Benton Harbor began having elevated levels of lead starting with the 2018 monitoring period but not earlier is unknown, state officials said. But it was "likely a change in sampling protocols and locations by the city," they added. Lead pipes, they say, are the most significant source of lead in the water.

The state warns that low levels of lead in children can lower academic achievement, decrease hearing, harm kidney function and create more problems with behavior and attention-related disorders. They can also harm adults.

Michigan's environmental department, known as EGLE, has advised the city to install corrosion-control treatment and directed officials to perform an in-depth corrosion control study, manage records of service line materials and sample site addresses and adjust corrosion inhibitor doses as well as improve its sample record retention. It's also facilitating access to free filters for homes and communication with residents to hear their concerns.

Benton Harbor City Manager Ellis Mitchell declined repeated requests to comment. The leaders of F&V Operations, which is running the city's water treatment facility after Benton Harbor's longtime manager was recently removed by city officials after a missed treatment, also declined comment.

Ninah Sasy, the state environmental department's clean water public advocate, said officials are helping residents understand how they can get their lead service lines replaced.

Sasy said her role is to ensure "that people feel heard" and that residents have a "clear avenue for reporting those concerns but also making sure that we're held accountable."

How Benton Harbor compares

In 2018, Benton Harbor's lead in water was 22 ppb for the 90th percentile of samples compared with the federal action level of 15 ppb. It then jumped to 32 ppb in 2019 and fell to 24 last year. The city is sampling 66 homes out of nearly 5,900 water service lines.

Flint's lead levels were 20 ppb at the 90th percentile in the first half of 2016, fell below the action level to 12 ppb in the second half of 2016 and have remained at 6 ppb or lower since, according to state data. Flint was switched back to the Detroit area water system in October 2015 from the corrosive Flint River.

Critics have argued the state covered up excessive lead levels early in the water crisis after the city — run by state-appointed emergency managers — switched over to improperly treated Flint River water in April 2014. The Michigan Attorney General's Office has filed criminal charges against a former Department of Health and Human Services official for allegedly "concealing and later misrepresenting data related to elevated blood lead levels in children in the city of Flint."

Most of Flint's residents have continued to rely on bottled water and faucet filters because of their mistrust of government. Almost all of the city's service lines have been replaced except for fewer than 500 service lines that are left to be checked, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 5 said in December.

There was a point when Flint had catastrophic lead levels. Virginia Tech water expert Marc Edwards and his team in mid-2015 analyzed 30 water samples collected by residents from Flint homes and found the lowest lead level was 300 ppb, while the average was 2,000 ppb and the highest was more than 13,000 ppb.

Still, Benton Harbor's results that have ranged from 24 ppb to 32 ppb are a cause for concern even with a low sampling of homes that exceeded advisory lead levels, said Terese Olson, an associate professor in the department of civil and environmental engineering at the University of Michigan.

"No amount of lead is deemed safe and your vulnerability is often exaggerated by when in your life you're exposed to it," Olson said. "So if you are a young child that's going to have to

live with the lead you're exposed to as a child if it's high, that's a far more worrisome problem."

Berrien County health officials said they have not seen alarming trends of Benton Harbor children affected by lead. Lead levels are measured for children enrolled in the Medicaid health program and sent to the state, said county spokeswoman Gillian Conrad.

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State of Michigan officials said they are working with Benton Harbor officials to implement corrosion control treatment. The state environmental department found compliance problems such...CHRIS DUMOND, SPECIAL TO THE DETROIT NEWS

Of the 66 Benton Harbor homes that were tested in December 2020, 11 exceeded the advisory lead amount, according to the state's data. It is unclear the exact number of the city's service lines that are lead. About 14% of the 5,877 lines are lead, 27% are made of an unknown material but are likely lead, almost 10% are galvanized pipes and there is no information at all about nearly half of the lines.

Neighboring St. Joseph, an 84% White community with more than 8,300 residents, has had 9 ppb the past three years. There are 106 lead pipes and 2,457 service lines of unknown composition that are likely lead with 193 lead pipes that have been replaced since 2018, city officials said.

Benton Harbor's higher lead levels could be due to water treatment and the kinds of chemicals and total water used by residents, said Greg Alimenti, the water plant superintendent in St. Joseph.

"I think there are a lot of factors in play," Alimenti said.

Using more than \$200,000 in state funds awarded in recent years, Benton Harbor has replaced more than 20 residential lead lines of about 40 targeted. The city last year received \$5.6 million in federal funds to replace lead pipes — money that was approved during the Barack Obama presidency but was not officially awarded to Benton Harbor until last year, Muhammad said.

The Rev. Edward Pinkney, a civil rights activist who leads the Benton Harbor Community Water Council, said he is concerned about the lead levels. He said he is glad city officials are taking it seriously, "but it took them a couple of years to get on board and actually want to fight this problem."

"They didn't take it seriously and they weren't telling residents the truth," said Pinkney, whose organization teamed with a testing facility to measure lead in the water.

Pinkney said the lead problem was allowed to "get out of control," but the public is more engaged and demanding action. This would not have been allowed to happen in nearby St. Joseph, he contended.

"I think that's where race comes into play. They (St. Joseph) have the resources to do what needs to be done to make sure they have less in their water than everybody else," he said. "That's the No. 1 issue, resources."

Benton Harbor was run by a state-appointed emergency manager from 2010-14 after city officials overspent their budgets and ran up debt.

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The Rev. Edward Pinkney stands in front of the Benton Harbor Water Filtration Plant. Pinkney said the lead problem was allowed to "get out of...CHRIS DUMOND, SPECIAL TO THE DETROIT NEWS

But Pinkney placed blame on city leaders, too, arguing, "they never really cared that the water was bad."

State finds compliance issues

Benton Harbor has a multifaceted problem that goes beyond lead pipes, said Brandon Onan, who leads the state Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy's lead and copper unit in the drinking water and environmental health division.

"Lead pipes definitely are the primary source of lead that we're seeing in the community, and it's where we are getting the elevated levels from," Onan said. "With that, the removal of that source is the ultimate cure. But there are time and money constraints there."

The state is working with the city to "implement corrosion control treatment," he said. The water is now being treated, he said, with a phosphorus-based inhibitor "and the numbers are coming down."

EGLE found compliance problems such as monitoring and reporting violations with the city's water treatment facility, Onan said.

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Benton Harbor deals with high lead levels in water

"There was just some inconsistency in operation so we've been working very tightly with the city to try to rectify any of those types of problems," he said. "I don't believe that any of those issues were anything that resulted in some of these releases in lead."

State officials said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is aware of Benton Harbor's lead levels.

Corrosion control treatment was put in place in March 2019 and has since been adjusted to be more effective as of last month, EGLE officials said. Without performing scale analyses on pipes, state officials said they have no way of knowing what type of barrier may have existed.

Stagnant water is a concern in all drinking water systems, state officials said.

But Muhammad, who admitted the city had water treatment problems, argued there has been no spike in lead cases, "no one has been hospitalized due to lead issues" or died.

Olson countered lead exposure can be damaging over time and doesn't normally result in immediate deaths.

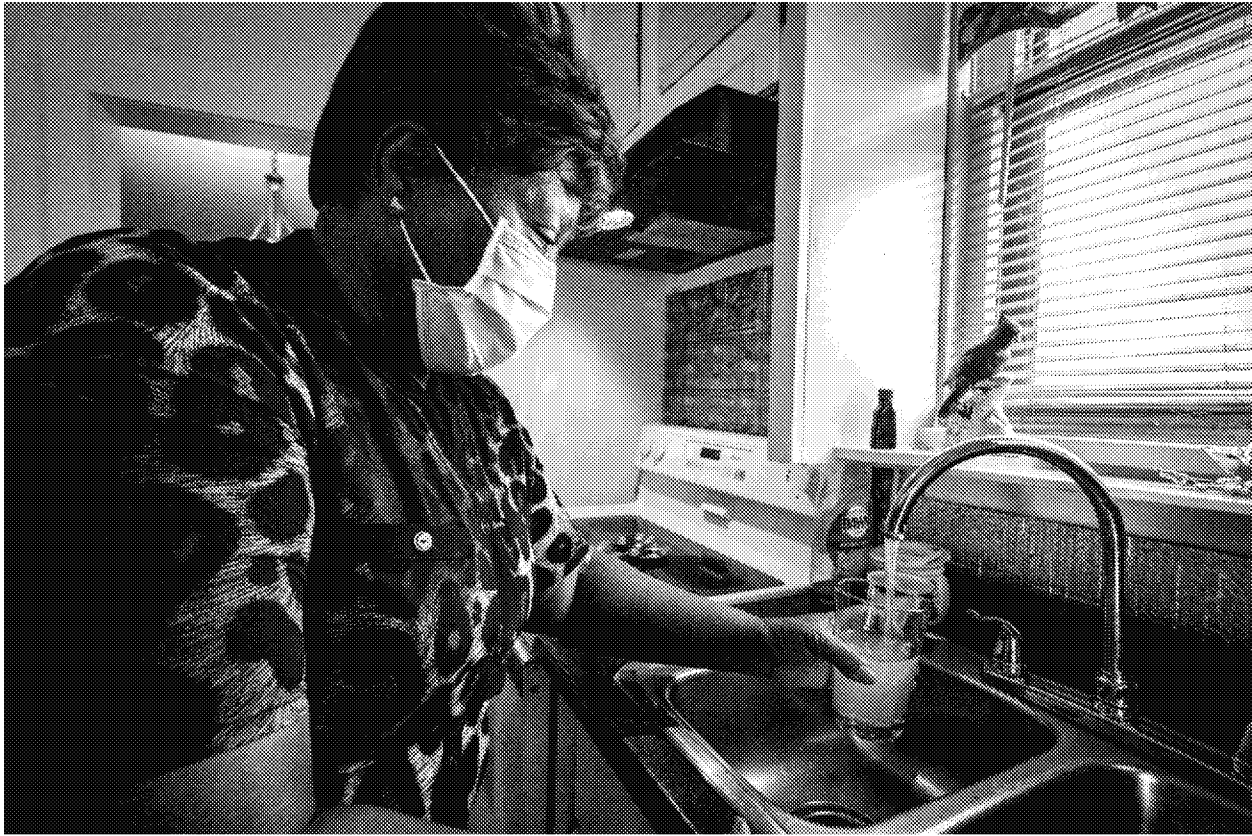
The mayor contended the issue is "very complex" and boils down to "old infrastructure" from homes built in the 1920s, '30s and '40s.

"You can't tell me one city in Michigan where there's not lead in the water," Muhammad said. "Benton Harbor has just become the poster child for that issue because EGLE failed in Flint, and now everybody wants to right the wrong and act as if they're trying to address the issue by making Benton Harbor the city that's bullied."

Emma Kinnard, 77, a longtime resident of Benton Harbor, said she first noticed her water turn a dark color.

"Something is definitely wrong if this water's brown," she said.

Last month, Kinnard said she received a letter from city officials saying in November the water system "violated a drinking water treatment requirement." This development and three years of lead violations have her furious at elected officials.



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Emma Kinnard, 77, longtime Benton Harbor resident

It's just a failure altogether because they should have someone to keep a watch on our water who knows what they are doing.

"It's just a failure altogether because they should have someone to keep a watch on our water who knows what they are doing," Kinnard said. "They are still not getting the results of getting clean water ... water that wouldn't harm our children as well as adults."

Muhammad said Benton Harbor will eventually get the lead lines replaced with federal funding and investment. He said he is taking the issue seriously.

"Not to minimize the issue of lead, which is a lifelong debilitating effect, but one household that exceeds the lead limit is one too many," the mayor said. "We have inherited old infrastructure and old homes."

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